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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the difficulties faced by rural school districts in their efforts to serve children with severe multiple disabilities. Both historic and contemporary views on mainstreaming and inclusion of students with multiple disabilities are presented. Concerns of educators about the inclusion of such students center around the amount of time required to ensure appropriate inclusion. Suggestions offered include the use of student-centered learning approaches such as cooperative learning, holistic approaches to reading and language instruction, and curricular modification. Mainstreaming advocates believe that special education teachers require in-depth training and extensive support. Suggestions for rural schools include: (1) computer applications utilizing Internet, e-mail, and distance learning; (2) team teaching interactions at both the elementary and secondary levels; (3) peer tutoring and service education (experiences in volunteerism) of mainstreamed public school students who can assist their special education counterparts; (4) collaboration between nondisabled and disabled students in after-school activities; (5) involvement of faculty in nonschool activities; (6) working relationship with community medical and health care professionals; and (7) professional educators serving as an integral part of family support systems. Contains 14 references. (CDS)

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MULTIPLE DISABILITIES: IS RURAL INCLUSION POSSIBLE?

The I.D.E.A. defines multiple disabilities as follows: "concomitant impairments (such as mental retardation-orthopedic impairments, etc.), the combination of which causes such severe educational problems that they cannot be accommodated in special education programs solely for one of the impairments. The term does not include children who are deaf-blind." (34 C.F.R., Part 300, Sec. 300.7). Orelove and Sobsey (1996) suggest that the term applies to children with "1) mental retardation requiring extensive or pervasive supports, and 2) one or more significant motor or sensory impairments and/or special health care needs"(p. 1). Heller and Alberto (1996) state that there is no single definition or common set of characteristics of persons in this category (p. 351). They further suggest that this disability does not include the combination of a major disability with a minor impairment or major disability with secondary conditions (p. 351).

Orelove and Sobsey (1996) categorize the needs of children with multiple disabilities as follows: Physical and Medical (restriction of movement, skeletal deformities, sensory disorders, seizure disorders, lung and breathing control, and other medical problems) Educational (appropriate positioning and handling, appropriate methods of communication, means to choose, and other educational needs such as restrictions placed upon physical activities by the presence of seizures) and Social/Emotional (p. 2-4). Heller and Alberto (1996) suggest that combinations of disabilities from six categories of childhood conditions (physical impairments, health impairments, sensory impairments, communication disorders, cognitive impairments, and psychosocial disorders) may result in a child being labeled multiply disabled (p. 352-353).

Downing and Eichinger (1996) provide the following description of students with severe sensory and multiple impairments: auditory and visual learning difficulties, difficulty understanding spoken and written language, difficulty remaining seated at a desk during seatwork, greater success when actively involved in a learning activity and "provided with tactual cues, pictures, objects, parts of objects and clear models of behavior", and a need for time to examine stimuli and be provided with several repetitions of the learning activity. The ability to ensure the participation of students with multiple disabilities in inclusive settings will certainly be impacted by their unique sets of instructional needs.

In an article describing strategies for the inclusion of students with multiple disabilities, Jones and Carlier (1995) point out the tremendous concern general educators have about the inclusion of students with multiple disabilities. In particular, they focus on the amount of time required to ensure appropriate inclusion of these students. Eichinger and Woltman (1993) offer three suggestions which address the use of student-centered learning approaches: cooperative learning, holistic approaches to reading and language arts instruction, and curricular modification. These suggestions serve as a basis for development of a full inclusion program. Giangreco, Edelman, MacFarland, and Luiselli (1997) imply that the concurrent occurrence of sensory impairments with "challenging cognitive, physical, health, and behavioral characteristics" impact attitudes of educators involved in the delivery of services. Hamre-Nietupski, McDonald, and Nietupski (1992) indicate that teachers are concerned about the manner in which both skill gains and social acceptance can be promoted within the framework of the regular classroom. Concerns centered on four challenges: provision of functional curricula in regular classrooms,

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provision of community-based instruction, scheduling of staff coverage, and promotion of social integration.

Students with multiple disabilities face a variety of personal challenges in their attempt to benefit from their environment. Complicating this effort are the many barriers (planned and accidental) which force educators to seek extraordinary solutions to essentially simple problems. This paper will focus on the educational needs of students with multiple disabilities in inclusive environments within the context of rural America. An effort will be made to examine the foundations of best practices within the inclusion movement, and to address the issues facing rural communities as they struggle to empower students with multiple disabilities while enabling their families to continue to educate their children at home. Facing the challenges of including students with severe multiple disabilities in rural settings is daunting to say the least. A review of the literature along with practical solutions from the field will be provided.

Least Restrictive Environment — Variations on a Theme

Both Improving America's School Act of 1993 and Goals 2000 mandates mention various possibilities for improving the education of U.S. public school students--regular and special needs. Both reports allude to inclusive measures that could strengthen and amalgamate students towards more productive school and societal careers. Mainstreaming (encouraging placement in general education settings while maintaining the continuum of services) and inclusion (mandating that all special students, including those with severe multiple disabilities, be placed in general education classrooms) have reached an impasse that stems back to P.L. 94-142.

That landmark special education legislation initiated a plethora of current student practices, not the least of which is "least restrictive environment." Mainstreaming and inclusion concepts do not necessarily mean or mandate least restrictive status per se. However, Individual Education Plan (I.E.P.'s) advocates often use classroom adaptations and teacher support to give special education students opportunities to interact with their mainstreamed peers. Such vital and cohesive interactions, in turn, lead to all students becoming more aware, receptive, and knowledgeable of their respective gifts, skills, and potentials. If, with P.L. 94-142, least restrictive environment became the primary focus for the mainstreaming platform, especially for students with mild disabilities, then inclusion has become an emotional forum regarding public school placement of students with more severe disabilities. Active debate regarding what least restrictive status is or could be rages between two equally divided philosophical camps.

Stainback and Stainback (1992) represent full inclusionists. They suggest and urge that inclusion be the special education norm, and in their recommendations they do not allow for part-time or pull-out status. Where mainstreaming connotes and denotes opportunities for special needs students to experience regular education classrooms, Stainback and Stainback suggest that offering a dual curriculum for special students eventually leads to the temptation of restricting their assimilation into schools--and thus into society. By whatever means and adaptations possible, maintain full inclusionists, several non-negotiable postulates are evident. First, all students deserve the best possible education, and regular classrooms can be that location--with selected and perhaps profound adaptations (Baker, Wang, and Walberg, 1995). Studies have not been provided that demonstrate that pull-out and part-time programs work better than inclusion, suggest advocates. Last, inclusionists urge more thorough and comprehensive training and education be provided for all public school teachers if they are to serve their special education students consistently and professionally. Pre-IDEA classrooms have been found to be inadequate for special people, conclude inclusionists, and there is concern that without lobbying for

complete integration, a return to more "separate but equal" classrooms might be reinvented (Stainback and Stainback 1992).

Mainstream advocates build their platform on educating special needs students to the best of their capabilities. They suggest inclusion is a philosophical dais, one that has not been adequately thought out, tested, and/or effected. Mainstream people maintain current special education teachers require in-depth training; changes that would bring students with mental retardation and multiple disabilities into all public school classes would mean teachers would need consummately extensive support (Vaughn & Schumm 1995). The remainder of their case argues that forcing students into mainstreamed classes pro forma does not necessarily guarantee least restrictive environment. Some students need much more individualized and specialized attention in one-on-one or small group stations--curricular potpourri can and does work for students needing instructional varieties. Last, testing and validity has not been established to prove superiority of inclusionism vs. mainstreaming (Bos & Vaughn, 1998).

Placement Needs and Rural Concerns

That the above debate has not reached any stasis or final solutions is an important consideration for the next portion of this paper. However, the location of any particular school is an important construct in the argument of where and how to place students (Davis, Kilgo,& Gamel-McCormick, 1998). That more affluent and bigger school districts often have more choices both philosophically and physically is often true. Small, rural schools have many challenges to the least restrictive placements of students with mental retardation and multiple disabilities (Turnbull, Turnbull, Shank,& Leal, 1995).

Discussions with several special education directors in southwestern Oklahoma have resulted in the identification of some specific problems. To begin, rural schools often have small classes where elementary school teachers know their young people well and make allowances for mild and moderate placements. When there is an occasional need for placement of a student with severe disabilities, the teachers, administrators, and students have made in-class modifications for that person. Those same teachers, especially the elementary people, but also including the secondary staffs as well, have to teach a much broader range of classes, and utilize team teaching and team-oriented methodologies (G. Jarvis, personal communication, October 26, 1998).

In locations contacted in southwestern Oklahoma, the prevailing academic notion was one of school self-sufficiency. More than one administrator said: "We take care of our own." Last, it was indicated that several schools are now planning to use electronic media to assist their curriculum development. Computers, per se, are not the only or total answer to school placements for students with mental retardation and multiple disabilities. However, many teachers in southwest Oklahoma who have not had benefit of collaborative measures before Internet, e-mail, and other distance learning opportunities, can now use those technologies to benefit their students. Though rural schools might be limited to faculty that they might employ, they are not limited to the intellectual capital that they can reap with computer-aided instruction.

Community and Meeting Needs

The people, curricula, and program challenges that face 21st century special educators are legion and the complexities extreme. The debate relative to the implementation of the concept of least restrictive environment continues. Rural special education programs, based on our research in southwestern Oklahoma, offer a variety of opportunities for the delivery of appropriate educational

services for students with severe to profound mental retardation and multiple disabilities. We postulate our research will confirm there are unifying pedagogical principles that apply to the rural school personnel we have contacted. Those principles include the following suggestions, ones that other rural school districts might use to efficiently aid their own special education programs:

1) Computer applications utilizing Internet, e-mail, and distance learning;

2) Team teaching interactions at both the elementary and secondary levels;

3) Peer tutoring and service education (experiences in volunteerism) of mainstreamed public schools students who have and can assist their special education counterparts;

4) Collaboration on the part of nondisabled students with students with disabilities in after-school classes and activities;

5) Involvement of faculty in nonschool activities with students with disabilities;

6) Close contact and working relationship with community medical and health care professionals; and

7) Professional educators serving as integral parts of a family's support system.

Conclusion

Throughout this paper the terms "mainstreaming" and "inclusion" have been used to describe views, both historic and contemporary, which attempt to put a human face on the legal concept of least restrictive environment. Discussion has also focused on the difficulty faced by rural school districts in their efforts to serve children in their communities who have severe multiple disabilities. Despite the tremendous challenges facing these rural communities, there exists a pervasive sense of shared responsibility by many of their educators.

We live in an age in which the boundaries that confine us are being crossed with electronic fiber-optic highways. We also live in an age in which people are searching for a sense of community perceived by many to have disappeared long ago. The sense one has, after discussing the needs of children and youth with multiple disabilities in rural communities, is that "we know each other here, and we want to take care of each other, and given the right tools, we can accomplish that." By no means is that feeling universal in rural schools. But for those districts where it exists, students with severe multiple disabilities have an opportunity to experience learning in an inclusive setting, which some use as a synonym for "community."

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